

Looking for new ways of bringing different dimensions of lives together. An interview with Andy Furlong

Edited by Andrea Pirni

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Among his most recent books about youth's condition: Youth Studies. An introduction (2013); (ed.) Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood. New perspectives and agendas (2009); (with D. Woodman) Youth and Young Adulthood: Critical Concepts in Sociology (2009); Higher Education and Social Justice (2009); (with F. Cartmel) Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives (2007); (with F. Cartmel) Graduates from Disadvantaged Families: Early Labour Market Experiences (2005); (with B. Stalder and A. Azopardi) Vulnerable Youth: Perspectives on Vulnerability in Education, Employment and Leisure (2000); (with F. Cartmel) Young People and Social Change: Individualization and Risk in Late Modernity (1997).

Youth is a social phenomenon, typical of contemporary societies. Western modernity has socially produced youth as an incubation phase of the adulthood and as an acquisition phase of the latent model of modern society. Since a few decades, we have been witnessing the extension of the youth condition; in some societies, such as the Italian one, with greater intensity than other societies, such as the north European ones. Some concepts stated in the literature – as “post-adolescence”, “young adulthood”, “emerging adulthood”

– support this trend by showing how youth is increasingly hybrid due to factors connected with adolescence and adulthood. This has gradually involved cohorts born since the ‘60s. We can assume, among others, two explanations. Both are related to the deep change that took place in European societies in the decades after World War II, particularly from the late ‘60s until the ‘90s. On the macro-social level. European societies have adopted a strong and defined structure, significantly strengthening the trends that had manifested themselves in the meantime including urbanization, scholarization, standardization of employment. This configuration has become institutionalized over time and policies have worked to reproduce it. Social change and systemic factors, active at different levels, make this model less sustainable today stimulating its transformation. However, there is not a new model. Therefore, the phase of the life-cycle in which it should establish a new social structure extends. In short, the theories of reflexive modernization show how the (post)modern societies are changing without a specific project: is the extension of youth an endogenous phenomenon capable of selecting a new elite who can propose a new project? On the meso-social level. The older generations who planned the society we live in belong to the cohorts born in the ‘40s and early ‘60s: they have experienced a transition to “intense” and “short” adulthood, in a relatively fast time. Overall, these cohorts shape a large generation who has profoundly outlined our society. For a long time – often even today – this generation has formally or informally occupied leading roles in political, economic, cultural spheres. Has this dynamic stimulated the extension of youth? A dominant generation – a gerontocratic society – tends to extend the transition to adulthood to postpone generational replacement? In summary: can we study change in youth through a perspective that considers the distribution of power between the generations? Can this be an explanation for the differences between northern and southern European societies? Does the progressive aging of the population, as a demographic phenomenon, support these interpretations?

Among scholars from different disciplines who study youth, there is fairly widespread agreement about key trends, especially the protraction of the youth phase of the lifecourse. This has led to the introduction of new terminologies to refer to a period of life that falls between that traditionally regarded as (dependent) youth and (independent) adulthood; variously described as young adulthood, emerging adulthood and post-adolescence. Clearly, as Arnett points out, there are significant differences between a young person of 13 or 14, still at school and living with their parents, as someone in their late 20s who may also be in full-time education and living in the parental home. However, these terms are not neutral and are built on contrasting theoretical models. Specifically, post-adolescence and emerging adulthood are based on a staged model of development that remains common in psychology and which maintains that in the post-adolescent stage significant physiological differences can be identified between “young” and “mature” adults (e.g. views about the state of development of young people’s brain and its implications for assessing risk). In contrast, the term young adulthood is more in tune with

sociological ways of thinking and recognises the contested and socially constructed nature of this part of the lifecourse.

As young adulthood blends seamlessly into youth and adulthood, it can be frustrating for researchers who cannot identify clear start and end-points. Nevertheless, the contested nature of the concept promotes the recognition of the politics that underpin the protraction of the youth phase. Here we must recognise that the institutionalised protraction of the youth phase weakens young people as social actors and helps promote their exploitation by the baby boomers. Young people have seen their relative wage rates decline (in some countries, such as the UK, differentials are underpinned by legislation) while increases in house prices relative to wages block the road to independence. Qualification inflation and increased competition among young people for quality jobs promotes protracted educational participation, despite evidence of poor returns for graduates who are faced with a growth of opportunities at the lower end of the labour market in insecure forms of employment. Against this backdrop, the political voice of the baby boomers ensure that threats to their standard of living are repelled while austerity measures are disproportionately shouldered by the young.

If we recognise a fundamental conflict of interest between young people and the ruling generation, we begin to recognise generational conflict as a potential motor of change: as highlighted in classic works by commentators such as Feuer and Mannheim. In this vein we can see examples of the rise of youth-driven political movements in a number of European countries, stimulated by the inequitable burdens of austerity packages. On the other hand, it is also important to be aware of the extent to which the process of individualisation weakens the political resolve of young people many of whom engage in a process of self-blame rather than identifying systemic failings.

In sum, the recognition of power differentials between generations allows us to take a fresh perspective on processes of social change, although north-south differences in Europe are more a question of degree.

Youth Studies seem to proceed along two lines that rarely meet. On the one hand, there are scholars who work about the conceptualization of the youth phase and, on the other hand, scholars who are concerned with the behavior of young people in specific fields, from politics to employment, from deviance to lifestyles. A very patchy scenario comes out. You have made the first real effort to systematize these studies: can you see some interpretation lines able to combine these two trends and / or able to effectively combine these different fields?

While it is true that there has been a long-standing division between what we may refer to as “cultural” and “transition” perspectives on youth, the very best research has always involved an approach that merged the two perspectives. Indeed, I argue that if we are to address “big” social science questions

through the study of young people, then we have to understand macro-level drivers as well as the micro-level processes which drive social change and reproduction.

What are some of the similarities between young Europeans and young Americans or young people of other countries? What are, on the contrary, the differences? Is there a European youth? If so, through which phenomena is the European youth delineating?

The similarities between young people in countries across the global north are far greater than the differences. Certainly processes of economic and social change are further advanced in some countries than others, but the trajectories are similar. For example, young people in Japan experienced a process of restructuring following a major recession two decades ago: this led to the growth of precarious work forms in the 1990s that we are seeing in Europe now following our more recent recession. In the US, job insecurity has also been evident for some time, but driven more by politics than by economics.

How can the growing convergence of educational systems in Europe influence the social construction of the European youth?

Educational convergence is a political response to a set of common conditions. As such, we can expect to see increasing commonalities in European youth, although it is important to recognise that education-employment linkages vary in strength and are affected by policies relating to both spheres. In Germany, Austria and Switzerland these linkages are highly regulated, resulting in lower rates of youth unemployment but at the same time restricting the potential for social mobility.

The axis defined by the economic dependence-autonomy has qualified for a long time the studies about young people, becoming almost a paradigm: are there other heuristically fertile paradigms able to replace it?

It is difficult to conceptualise the youth phase without recourse to debates about dependence and independence. At the same time, we must recognise a blurring of the lines between dependence and independence. Young people may rely on intergenerational resource transfers long after entering employment and in a context where job insecurity has become endemic, some form of dependence, be it on the family or on the state, may be lifelong.

Is there a conflict in Europe today among the younger generation and the older generation? In what forms does it occur?

Conflict between generations is increasing and is likely to intensify as young people begin to recognise the extent to which generational exploitation

has become entrenched. In many European countries “unfunded” approaches to the provision of pensions, under which the current generation of workers pays for those currently retired, mean that young people in poorly paid and insecure jobs who are struggling to get by will be paying for the pensions of a generation who are far more affluent than themselves. Moreover, with older people being more likely to vote, politicians tend to protect the benefits of a generation who are active politically while showing less concern for a generation who are less involved with the formal political process.

Youth has big differences within itself and is very multifaceted: which are the main cleavages?

The differences among young that are most significant are largely the same as among older generations: social class, gender, colour, place of residence and social capitals, none of which show signs of weakening. However, with an increased importance on education and labour market insecurity, the ability and willingness of a family to transfer resources from older to young members is becoming increasingly significant. For example, wealthier parents may pay for postgraduate courses and may subsidise young people undertaking unpaid internships in order to build up experience in forms of employment where competition is high, such as the media, banking and politics.

Are today's young Europeans actors of social change? In what fields are they more innovative and carriers of change?

Young people are often reluctant actors of change. In other words they are forced to react to changing circumstances and have to be creative in the ways they imagine and build careers and manage lives. Here, as Woodman has shown, young people have to explore new ways of bringing different dimensions of their lives together, managing complex, fragmented, work schedules with the conflicting schedules of friends and family.

What lines of research should we follow in order to overcome an interpretative impasse of the sociology of youth in relation to study social change? Which are the most interesting results that emerge from comparative research? How can empirical research into young people be done?

I am not convinced that we have reached an interpretive impasse with regards to the study of social change, although I do think there is a tendency to exaggerate change and underplay continuities. There is a need to develop a more rounded understanding of change that applies in comparative contexts; an understanding that has not been helped by the top-down approach to research agendas developed by the European Commission. Large projects incorporating ten or more countries tend to get overwhelmed by detail

and can easily lose sight of the bigger issues. Modern research agendas are most effective when they combine quantitative and qualitative approaches and where they more easily across the “false binary” of transition and cultural approaches.

Thank you, Andy.